The Washington Post CITY LIFE Obituaries / Weather / Comics

MONDAY, DECEMBER 28, 1970 B1

Ft. Stevens, at 13th and Quackenbos Streets NW, was the site of a Union victory in July, 1864, over the soldiers of Gen. Jubal A. Early.

District's Old Forts

Squirrels Man Ivied Ramparts

By Henry Aubin
Washington Post Staff Writer

Washington's Civil War forts, long on history but short on fame, are thriving on neglect.

Largely ignored by tourist guidebooks and overgrown with vines, scrub and trees, most of the 35 forts which have survived the bulldozer are serene pockets of oblivion in the midst of busy residential and commercial sections of Washington and its suburbs.

They are all that remain of the ambitious network of 68 forts designed to guard the capital from the Confederate Army. Then, as now, glory eluded them: only one, Fort Stevens, ever saw combat.

Located at 13th and Quackenbos Streets NW, Fort Stevens is one of the few restored sites—it boasts replicas of the original 17 cannon and mortars used to repulse the Southern raiders on July 12, 1864. Every year the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic gather there to celebrate the anniversary of the fight, but attendance has been slipping and armed services bands have not performed there for several years.

Another well visited site is Fort Ward in Alexandria, restored in 1964 and having its own museum.

But for the most part, the sites are without military trappings and evoke peace and quiet. They consist of geometrically-shaped knolls, once ramparts, in a setting of woods, squirrels and birds.

Sixteen forts are owned by National Capital Parks. A handful have facilities for picnickers, but at this time of year they mostly draw such occasional visitors as people walking dogs, boys playing soldier and — to judge by the number of halfpint liquor bottles in the leaves—persons drinking in history.

Varying in size from a couple of acres to more than a square mile, the forts and their surrounding parklands afford a bit of restful nature in which to get away from it all—the occupants of three parked D.C. Department of Sanitary Engineering cars, enjoying an undisturbed sylvan snooze at the rear of 41-acre Fort Totten Park at 3 p.m. one recent day, could tell you about that.

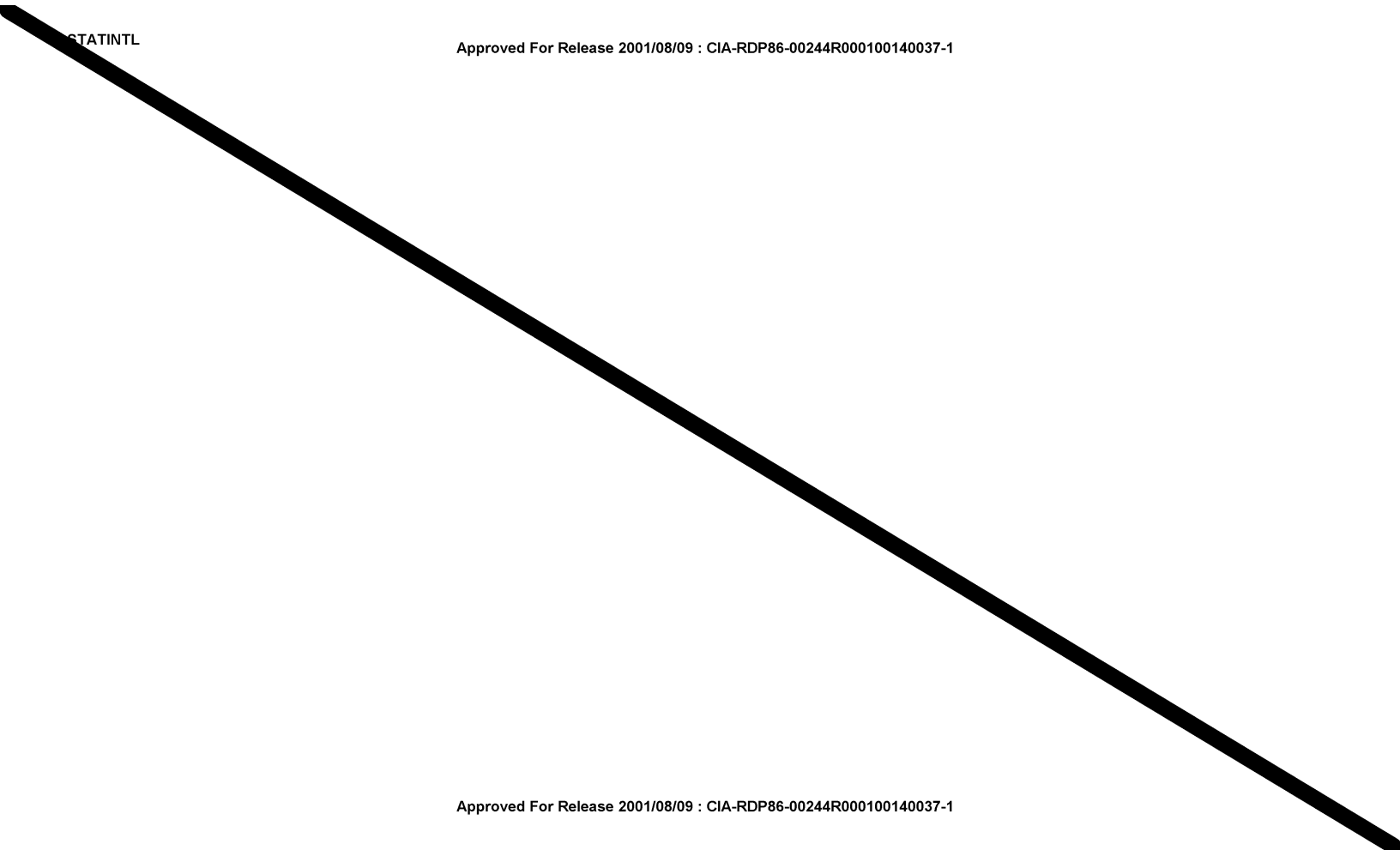
About half the original forts have been flattened by housing developments, schools and roads. According to Stanley McClure, regional historian for the National Capital Parks, the Seven Corners shopping center in Virginia occupies the site of Fort Buffalo, and the home of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in Northwest Washington sits atop what was once Fort Kearney which had 10 cannon.

Originally, the 68 forts had 807 cannon and 90 mortars, forming a 34-mile ring around the city. Rifle trenches linked most of the forts.

Since the turn of the century there have been proposals to link the forts with trails or, as a National Capital Planning Commission study recommended in 1959, a six-lane freeway. The freeway scheme was hailed by a group known as the Civil War Round Table which called it a way to "relieve downtown traffic congestion, . . . provide a scenic outer drive for visitors . . . (and) preserve the forts." The highway would have been 22 miles long.

The city seriously considered the idea until the mid 1960s, when the plan encountered money woes as well as opposition from some conservationists and neighborhood groups.

See FORTS, B3, Col. 1



D.C. Civil War Forts Bask in Sylvan Peace

FORTS, From B1

The latest plan would connect most of the D.C. forts with a hiking and bicycle trail and restore some of the fortifications. But lack of money has delayed indefinitely this National Capital Parks proposal, except for one two-mile stretch of trail built two years ago in sprawling Fort Dupont Park, officials say.

The forts were built by a panicky federal government shortly after the Southern victory at Bull Run in 1861. Washington was in the midst of hard times, facing not only the threat of attack but a host of internal problems.

Smallpox and other diseases were rampant. Indeed, notes historian Constance McLaughlin Green, "disease remained a greater threat to wartime Washington than the Confederate Army."

Some 50,000 Union troops were in hospitals in the area. Open sewage stagnated throughout the city, there was a housing crisis and soldiers passing through town thieved and lived it up (according to one tally, there were some 4,000 prostitutes).

In July, 1864 President Lincoln's fears of a Confederate attack were realized. Gen. Jubal A. Early led his Southern forces to Fort Stevens, found it unprepared and was beaten back only after the 11th-hour arrival of Union reinforcements.

Lincoln arrived at the fort with the reinforcements and, wearing his conspicuous stovepipe hat, stood briefly on the parapet while bullets flew by, until companions coaxed him down.

Historian John Clagett Proctor, writing in the Evening Star in 1934, observed that the assault came during the darkest days of the war and during an uphill reelection campaign by Lincoln. He added:

"The loss of the battle of Fort Stevens and the burning of Washington, which would probably have followed, would quite likely have resulted in the election of Gen. (George B.) McClellan. Increased prestige of the Southern states, in Europe, would have followed, and the seceding states would have been lost to the Union forever."

The forts make pleasant sightseeing. Here, in clockwise order, are brief accounts of some of the more interesting ones kept in various degrees of maintenance by National Capital Parks.

Fort Totten: You can drive into this wild, deserted park along a dirt road which begins at Crittenden Street, NE just off North Capitol Street. The fort itself, which had 18 guns, is well preserved. Oak trees grow in the ruins.

Fort Mahan: Located on a steep, wooded hill rising more than 100 feet above Benning Road NE, this is one of the more spectacularly situated forts. From 42d Street you can drive into it from the rear. It has a broad playing field and picnic tables where it once had 16 guns and three mortars.

Fort Chaplin: With a jungle of vines and undergrowth, this fort's locale is probably the wildest of any. Its evergreen-filled 30 acres are along East Capitol Street SE. You can best walk to the fort from Texas Avenue.

Fort Dupont: This is one of the smaller forts. It had only eight guns and one mortar, and its walls had a perimeter of 200 yards (as compared to the average-sized, 354-yard Mahan). Fort Dupont has, however, the largest park; its 787 acres feature a public golf course and scores of picnic tables in a well maintained recreation area. It is located along Minnesota and Massachusetts Avenue SE.

Fort Davis: It is next door to Dupont in thin strip of woods at Pennsylvania and Alabama Avenues SE. It had 12 guns and one cannon.

Fort Carroll: This one is in such poor condition that it takes a lot of imagination to picture it having a garrison designed to hold 569 men. It had 13 guns and a mortar along its 340-yard perimeter. It is found on a steep bluff at Nichols Avenue and South Capitol Street SE.

Fort Greble: Its 15 guns and two mortars overlooked the Potomac from what is now Nichols Avenue SW, next door to Junior Village. There are few traces of the fort, which had room for 1,000 men within its 327-yard walls.

Fort Ward: The only fort on this list not maintained by National Capital Parks, it is located along Shirley Memorial Parkway and West Braddock Road in Alexandria. It was carefully restored six years ago by the city of Alexandria, and one of the five original bastions has been rebuilt. It had 36 guns and its walls were 815 yards around. No admission is charged to visit the museum, open from noon to 5 p.m. on Sunday and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. all other days.

Fort Marcy: This is the one you see signs for along George Washington Memorial Parkway, just north of Chain Bridge. Equipped with 17 guns and three mortars, it guarded that bridge as well as the old Leesburg Turnpike.

It is well preserved although groundskeepers apparently do not stop motorcyclists from riding along the top of its ramparts. The preservation is due largely to the efforts 10 years ago of Mrs. R.F.S. Starr, who later became chairman of the Northern Virginia Regional Planning Commission. Learning that a bulldozer was about to smash the battlements to get gravel for road construction, Mrs. Starr dashed to the site and sat in her parked car in front of the bulldozer. Fairfax County later decided to make a monument of the fort.

Battery Kemble: This installation guarded Chain Bridge from the District side of the Potomac. From its hilltop location its two 100-pounder Parrott rifles could sweep the bridge and the Virginia hills beyond. All that remains now is a clump of curious mounds in a chic residential neighborhood. It is on Chain Bridge Road NW, off Nebraska Avenue.

Fort Reno: This was the largest fort north of the Potomac. Its walls measured 917 yards, and along them were 15 guns and three mortars. Located 430 feet above sea level—the highest point of land in D.C.—at what is now Chesapeake Street near Fort Drive NW, the fort controlled three main roads which entered Northwest Washington a century ago.

Today, however, there's nothing left of it. It is the site of two reservoirs and Woodrow Wilson High School's soccer field. Students at the school say their history teachers tell them about the fort year after year.

Fort DeRussy: A beauty—but it's hard to find. It's deep in Rock Creek Park, and there are no signposts. Park on the northeast corner of the intersection of Oregon Avenue and Military Road, and then hike about 300 yards up a horse trail.

It was a small fort—190 yards around—but with its 11 guns, one mortar and 100-pounder Parrott rifle it commanded the valley of Rock Creek. Today it is in fine shape, though overgrown with oak trees.

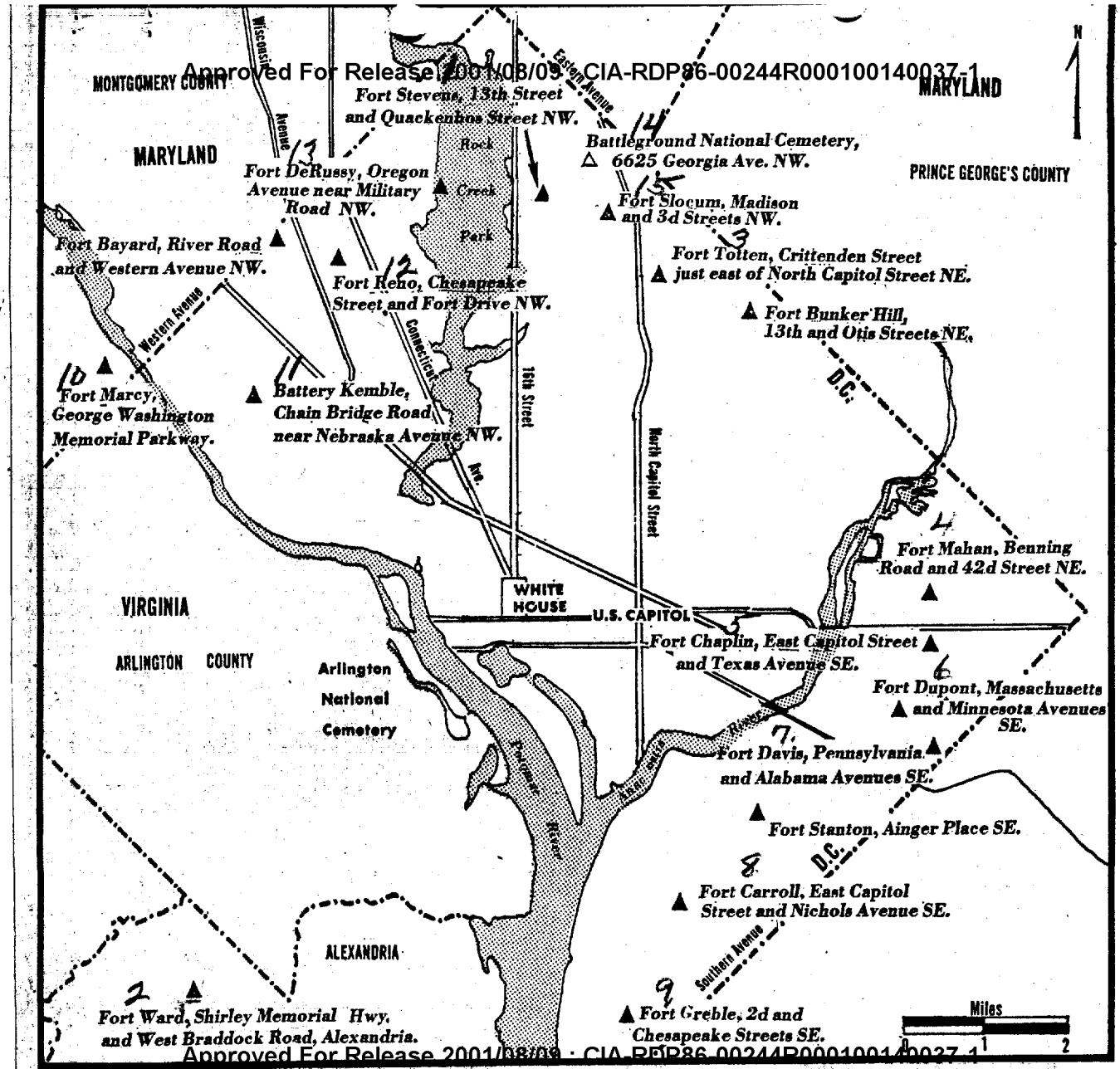
Fort Stevens: Because it was attacked, it is the most restored fort in D.C. What look like log abutments are really concrete bars. Originally it had a perimeter of 375 yards, but less than a third is visible.

Battleground National Cemetery, nearby at 6625 George Ave., NW, is the burial spot for 42 of the Union soldiers who fell at Fort Stevens.

Fort Slocum: Erosion has left little evidence that this fort once had 22 guns along a 653-yard wall. Some rifle trenches can still be seen. It is located on a pleasant, wooded rise at Madison and 3rd Streets NW.

By Douglas Chevalier—The Washington Post

Marker relates a bit of history of deserted Ft. Totten in NE, now a park.



By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

Map locates some of the area's surviving Civil War forts, built to protect D.C. from Confederate troops.